

# Senate Statistics

## Secretaries of the Senate

### Felton M. Johnston (1955-1965)



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Majorities may come and majorities may go but Skeeter is always the 97th Senator on the floor on our side.

—*Senator John C. Stennis (D-MS), 1955*

Under the banner headline "Senate's Undercover Executive," the Sunday *Washington Post* of August 15, 1965, explained to its readers that the nearly anonymous Secretary of the Senate was calling it quits after ten years on the job. "A focal Senate office which over the years has been rotated among scholars, generals, lawyers, merchants, career men and just plain politicians, received unaccustomed publicity last week." The publicity grew from speculation over selection of a successor to a high Senate office that few Americans had ever heard of. Observing that past secretaries had used the office as an effective political instrument, the *Post* reporter noted that its present occupant, the "genial but closed-mouth" Felton M. Johnston — "a quiet Senate career worker" — had rarely done that. The fifty-six-year-old Secretary's decision to retire brought to a close a career that spanned more than a third of a century.

Felton McLellan Johnston — known to his friends as "Skeeter" — was born on March 10, 1909, in Tallulah, Louisiana. He moved with his family to Clarksdale, in northern Mississippi, where he attended public schools and a local junior college. He went on to study at the University of Mississippi, from which he graduated in 1929. Impressed with the young man's intelligence and determination, Mississippi's senior U.S. senator, [Pat Harrison](#), hired him in August 1929 as a stenographer on his Capitol Hill staff.

When Senator Harrison became chairman of the Senate Finance Committee in 1933, Johnston followed to serve as that panel's assistant clerk and, later, as clerk. After Harrison's death in June 1941, Johnston moved to the State Department as its congressional liaison officer. He served there for two years and then enlisted in the United States army during World War II. In 1945, he returned to the State Department as special assistant to Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson.

When Secretary of the Senate [Edwin Halsey](#) died in January 1945, the Democratic Conference selected party secretary [Leslie Biffle](#) to replace him. This opened Biffle's job. In October of that year a search committee of senators screened six candidates and unanimously recommended Johnston, a close friend of Biffle, for the job. He held the party secretary post for nearly a decade, until his own election, on January 5, 1955, as Secretary of the Senate.

Any conversation about "Skeeter" Johnston during those years would quickly move to the subject of his penguin collection. Following a 1934 visit to the National Zoo to see penguins that Admiral Richard Byrd had brought back from his Antarctic expedition, Johnston began collecting penguin figures. When that collection overflowed available display space in his office, he continued to develop it at home. By the time of his Senate retirement, the collection reportedly came close to overrunning even that space.

Dorothea Scott, who started her thirty-two-year Senate staff career in 1945 as secretary to Johnston, remained with him until his 1965 retirement. Her 1992 oral history interview with the Senate Historical Office includes colorful references to the close relationships between Secretaries Johnston and Biffle, and the majority leaders under whom they served: [Alben Barkley](#), [Scott Lucas](#), [Lyndon Johnson](#) and [Mike Mansfield](#). Scott compared Johnston and Biffle. "Mr. Johnston was the one who was very conservative and very meticulous; not exactly quiet, but very, very respectful. Whereas Mr. Biffle was more on a social level with a lot of senators and cabinet people, Mr. Johnston considered himself more of their servant. He worked very, very hard."

Secretary Johnston enjoyed close relations with Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson. On Johnston's forty-eighth birthday, the majority leader sent him a gift of a television set. "I hope you have at least 48 more because this Senate needs you and loves you and I, personally, find you a source of great comfort in some of my most trying moments."

Hundreds of others in Washington shared Lyndon Johnson's high regard for "Skeeter." In August 1964, nearly seven hundred friends, including President Lyndon Johnson, gathered for a gala evening at Washington's Statler Hilton Hotel to toast this "man of quiet dignity" for his thirty-five years in the nation's capital.

A year later, as Johnston approached his eleventh anniversary as secretary, he told Majority Leader Mansfield of his plans to leave the Senate. "I am not mad at anybody and I certainly am not in any kind of trouble." He retired on December 30, 1965. Johnston later served on the American Battle Monuments Commission. The sixty-four-year-old former secretary died of a heart attack at his Washington home on April 20, 1973.